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Democrats Demand a Contra-Aid Special Prosecutor

By Joanne Omang
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Eleven House Judiciary Committee Democrats asked the Justice Department yesterday to name a special prosecutor to investigate possible illegal involvement of Reagan administration officials in aiding Nicaraguan rebels.

At the same time, Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff members said they would begin taking sworn depositions from persons willing to give testimony on additional allegations that the counter-revolutionaries, or contras, have been involved in gunrunning, drug trafficking and money laundering.

The moves follow disclosures that private contractors apparently have used U.S.-financed airfields in Honduras and commercial airports in Costa Rica in supplying the contras with weapons and medical aid.

They also come after reports that officials including Vice President Bush and the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador have had contacts with Max Gomez, also known as Felix Rodriguez, who allegedly coordinated some of those flights.

Gomez was named by American Eugene Hasenfus, who is the lone survivor of a C123 cargo plane shot down Oct. 5 in Nicaragua and claims to have been working for the Central Intelligence Agency.

John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee on criminal justice, told reporters yesterday the Ethics

in Government Act requires naming a special investigator if misconduct charges are "not wholly unsubstantiated" by available evidence. "I think we can meet that relatively low-level requirement," he said.

Conyers said he is "in the process of putting the case together" with news media reports and "exceedingly disturbing" evidence of government acts violating a June 1984 law banning official aid to the contras except intelligence-sharing.

"The credibility of the administration in this instance depends on its candor and adherence to the law," the 11 Democrats said in a letter to Attorney General Edwin Meese III, who has 30 days to respond. They named Bush, CIA Director William J. Casey, Defense

Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and six other national-security officials as possible violators of the law.

Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.) said Meese last year refused a similar request for a probe into contra activity but that evidence this time is "even more flagrant" and must be addressed.

Richard McCall, an aide to Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), said six bipartisan Foreign Relations Committee aides will take testimony from at least 15 persons under oath during the forthcoming congressional recess on charges of illegal acts by the contras.

Kerry on Thursday repeated a request for authority to subpoena witnesses to substantiate charges

outlined by his staff in a report. Committee Chairman Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) and ranking minority member Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) reasserted a July agreement under which the inquiry staff may merely ask the full committee to poll members on whether a subpoena should be issued if any potential witness refuses to be deposed or to turn over records.

The staff will report to members for a January decision on whether to launch a full investigation.

The Judiciary Committee letter was drafted by Conyers and signed by Democratic Reps. Edwards, Bruce A. Morrison (Conn.), George W. Crockett Jr. (Mich.), Barney Frank (Mass.), Robert W. Kastenmeier (Wis.), John F. Seiberling (Ohio), Patricia Schroeder (Colo.), Howard L. Berman (Calif.), Edward F. Feighan (Ohio) and Harley O. Staggers Jr. (W.Va.).